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The Circumpacific Substratum of Ancient Chinese Civilization[1]

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In a study of shamanism and hallucinogens among American Indians, Weston La Barre (1972) proposed that American Indian religions in general retain diagnostic features – prominent among them being an emphasis on the ecstatic experience – of an archaic Paleolithic and Mesolithic substratum which their ancestors brought on their entries into the New World from their Asian homelands. On the basis of Mesoamerican studies, Peter T. Furst (1976), following the same theme, reconstructed "the ideological content of Asian-American shamanism" as follows:

1. The shamanic universe is a magical one, and the phenomena of the natural and supernatural environments are the consequence of magical transformation, not creation *ex nihilo*, as they are in Judeo-Christian tradition. Transformation is, in fact, the basic, underlying principle of shamanic symbol systems.

2. The universe is typically multi-layered or stratified, with an Underworld below and an Upperworld above the middle level as principal divisions. Underworld and Upperworld are often further divided into several layers which usually have their respective spirit rulers and supernatural denizens. There may also be gods of the cardinal directions or world quarters, and supreme spirits who rule over the celestial and chthonic spheres respectively. While some of these deities control the fate of humanity and other forms of life, they are also subject to manipulation – e.g., through sacrifice. The several layers of the universe are connected by a central axis *(axis mundi)*, which merges conceptually and practically with the shaman's various symbols of ascent and descent to the Upper- and Underworlds. Shaman's trees or world trees are typically surmounted by a bird, symbol of celestial flight and transcendence. Again, typically, the world is divided into quarters, bisected by a horizontal north-south and east-west axis, and there are frequently color associations for the different directions.

3. It is further axiomatic of the intellectual universe of shamanism that man and animal are qualitatively equivalent, and that man is "never the lord of creation but always a pensioner on natural bounty," in the words of Herbert Spinden. Animal species, and plants as well, have their supernatural "Owners" or "Mothers," often appearing as large members of the species, who look after the welfare of their charges.

4. Closely tied to the concept of qualitative man-animal equivalence is that of man-animal transformation – that is, a primordial capability of people and animals to assume each other's forms. Man-animal equivalence also expresses itself in animal alter egos and companion animals; further, shamans typically have animal spirit helpers. Shamans and other participants in shaman-led ritual also symbolize transformation into their animal counterparts by donning skins, masks, and other characteristics of these animals.

5. All phenomena in the environment are animated by a life force or soul; hence there is in the shamanistic universe no such thing as an "inanimate" object in our sense.

6. In humans and animals the soul, or essential life force, characteristically resides in the bones, often those of the head. Humans and animals are reborn from their bones. Shamanistic skeletonization – the shaman's ritual initiatory death and rebirth in his ecstatic trance from his skeletal state, sometimes enacted by self-starvation to the point of near-skeletonization and commonly depicted symbolically among the shaman's paraphernalia and in his art – likewise is tied to these concepts.

7. The soul is detachable from the body and may travel over the earth or to Otherworlds; it may also be abducted by hostile spirits or sorcerers, and retrieved by the shaman. Soul loss is a common source of illness, and so is the intrusion of foreign objects into the body from a hostile environment. In fact, most illnesses are of magical origin, and their diagnosis and cure are the shaman's special province.

8. Finally, we have the phenomenon of the ecstatic trance, often, but by no means always and everywhere, induced by means of hallucinogenic plants.

After characterizing the shamanic world view, above, Peter Furst made the important observation that

> much of the above applies no less to civilized prehispanic Mesoamerica and its symbolic systems, insofar as we know them, than to the more classic kinds of shamanism among less complex societies. Origin through transformation or metamorphosis, rather than creation in the Biblical sense, is the hallmark of Mesoamerican religion. The stratified universe with its respective spirit rulers, world axis, world trees with birds, world mountains, world quarters and color directions – all these and more are surely Mesoamerican, as are qualitative equivalence of man and animal, naguals or alter egos, companion animals, the use of animal skins, claws, teeth, masks, and other parts to symbolize or effect transformation, etc. (Furst 1976:153; see also Furst 1973-74)

I have quoted Peter Furst at some length because his reconstruction of the "Asian-American" shamanistic

substratum applies to much more than Mesoamerican studies, and should receive much wider attention from students of ancient civilizations everywhere. More particularly, almost everything he has said applies to ancient China. My characterization of ancient Chinese civilization as shamanistic in a series of related studies (Chang 1983a and 1989), which need not be repeated here, has strengthened Furst's reconstruction and in a substantial sense expanded his Asian-American substratum geographically into the eastern part of the Old World of the ancient period. Instead of speculating about a "Paleo-Asiatic" complex lurking somewhere in northeast Asia that the Mayanists might imagine in seeking the religious roots of their people, in the new studies of China and Maya—as an outstanding example of a Mesoamerican civilization described elsewhere in this study—we can empirically establish a Maya-China cultural continuum based on real and powerful archaeological and textual data.

The problem with an essentially ethnological reconstruction of an ancient belief and ritual system, supposed to have been brought by ancestral Indians on their journeys across the Bering Strait, has always been the lack of empirical data from the ancient time period. Scholars who study the peopling of the New World are agreed that most, if not all, of the ancestral Indians came into the New World by way of the Bering Strait, and that geologically the waves of migration could have crossed the land-bridge or the narrow strait any time during the past 60,000 years, with the possible exception of the period of 18,000-15,000 years ago, the last maximal glacial statium (Fladmark 1983). Actual data brought to light in the New World—unquestionably dated finds—push the so-called Big Game Hunters, with their stone projectile points, to 15,000 years ago. There are claims of finds earlier than 18,000 years ago, but they are all to varying degrees being disputed (Jennings 1974; Wormington 1983).

Whatever one believes as to the antiquity of the event or events that led to the peopling of the New World, archaeology, by virtue of the material remains it can recover, does not furnish us with very much data concerning the contents of the luggage people brought with them. In 1962 H. Marie Wormington (1962) could say only that the tool kit carried by the migrants into America could have contained chopping tools, flake tools (resembling those of the late Mousterian industries), discoidal scrapers, crude blades, and possibly bifacially chipped, leaf-shaped blades, all percussion-flaked. This miserably inadequate inventory has not been significantly expanded even by new material brought to light in the last twenty-some years. One could discuss the technological fine points with regard to the precedence of the projectile points; but to substantiate archaeologically Peter Furst's reconstruction of the Asian-American shamanism that must have been a part of the cultural equipment of early humans as they entered the New World, archaeologists would have to bring to light many times more remains, especially those of perishable materials, than they have so far been able to find.

But archaeology does yield solid evidence from East Asia, undoubtedly the last leg of the long journey for the ancestral Indians before they crossed Beringia. New studies of ancient China should now be looked at from this context. The similarities in the arts of ancient China and ancient America are not a recent discovery. After the excavation of the Shang dynasty ruins in Anyang, begun in 1928, and when Shang Bronze art had been archaeologically authenticated and publicized, its striking similarity to Northwest Coast Indian art began to be noted. The points of similarity in the underlying principles of the two arts, as analyzed by Leonhard Adam and summarized by Claude Levi-Strauss (1963:246-247; see also Creel 1937), include the following: (1) intense stylization; (2) schematization or symbolism, expressed by emphasizing the characteristic features or adding significant attributes; (3) depiction of the body by "split representation"; (4) dislocation of details, which are arbitrarily isolated from the whole; (5) representation of *one* individual shown in front view with *two* profiles; (6) highly elaborate symmetry, which often involves asymmetric details; (7) illogical transformation of details into new elements; (8) finally, intellectual rather than intuitive representation, where the skeleton or internal organs take precedence over the presentation of the body. While conceding the possibility of some kind of historical connection between Shang and the Northwest Coast Indians, Levi-Strauss nevertheless believes that the common principles of decorative art found on the two coasts of the Pacific Ocean resulted from common expressions of similar societies in art.

As Shang and Chou art of China became better known, its similarities with the art of ancient Mesoamerica became increasingly noted. H. G. Creel related that when he showed Shang art objects to non-Chinese persons who confronted them for the first time, he heard them exclaim, "How similar they are to the Aztec and other Middle American art!" (Creel 1937:245). In the 1950s and 1960s diffusionist scholars compared Shang and Chou art to Mesoamerican art, and noted many specific similarities (Ekholm 1955, Heine-Geldern 1959). This approach reached a peak of sorts with Paul Shao's *The Origins of Ancient American Cultures*, published in 1983. While detailed analyses are left to future publications, Shao in this book places side by side iconographic elements common, or apparently common, to Shang and ancient Mesoamerica under the following categories: the dragon ancestral cult; the anthropomorphic dragon; the supernatural power symbol; the transterrestrial dragon; the rain deity; the feline-dragon alter ego; the iconographic costume; the man-animal interface; the flame-eyebrow icon; the bird-man icon; the bead of life; the eye-paw-wing complex; the body language; the totem base; the cross; the cosmic and calendric image.

I will not use any illustrations here, not because some of the comparisons may be far-fetched (they are), but because no amount of illustration can convince us that these similarities were the result of cultural contact, which is the mechanism Heine-Geldern and others used to explain them. Both the Shang and the ancient Mesoamerican civilizations were demonstrably the results of long indigenous developments in their respective regions of origin and growth. To attribute either's fundamental art style to a diffusion from the other does not make sense. In addition, the Shang date from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries B.C., whereas many of the Mesoamerican civilizations prospered many centuries after Christ.

However, to reject direct contact as the mechanism explaining the similar art styles is not to deny that there is a broad range of similarities. In fact, we find it hard to accept the diffusionist explanation precisely because the

similarities are so profuse and wide-ranging. An alternative explanation is to see many underlying stylistic and iconographic principles of Shang and Mesoamerican art as having been derived from a common Paleolithic substratum. We note that the categories of iconography Paul Shao has inventoried predominantly pertain to the animal kingdom and to the man-animal relationship. They point to precisely the kind of shamanistic cosmology that Peter Furst has reconstructed.

The interpretation of ancient Chinese civilization as being shamanistic provides new grounds for a characterization of this ancient substratum. The common characteristics of Chinese and Mayan civilizations comprise compelling evidence for seeing this ancient substratum as the common ancestor of both civilizations. China and Maya did not have to have contact to share those similarities; they were members of what we may refer to as the "Maya-China continuum." The establishment of the Maya-China continuum does several things for world cultural history:

1. It ties ancient China and ancient Maya together and explains their similarities without resorting to diffusionism;

2. It strongly suggests that the Asian-American shamanistic substratum was not a local tradition of Northeast Asia, but was a world phenomenon; and

3. It provides data in a new framework for the study of evolutionary principles that account for the emergence of civilizations throughout its domain.

For point number two I refer to the new study by Joseph Campbell (1983), *The Way of the Animal Powers.* In this first volume of the multi-volume *Historical Atlas of World Mythology,* Campbell traced crucial elements of a shamanistic mythology throughout the world, and he has traced them back to the Paleolithic hunters of both the Old and the New World. The earliest evidence of this is found, according to him, not in Mesoamerica, Northeast Asia, or China, but on the walls of the caves at Lascaux, perhaps 15,000 years ago, where we find "supine with out-flung arms, a man...with erect phallus and what would appear to be a bird's head—or perhaps he is wearing a mask. His hands also are bird-like, and there is the figure of a bird perched upon a vertical staff at his right." As birds are "the normal vehicles of wizard-flights in ecstacy," and bird-decorated costumes and staves, as well as bird transformations, are the rule in shamanistic contexts," Campbell believed that "the prostrate figure...[is] a shaman, rapt in trance" (Campbell 1983:65).

This reading of the features in the Upper Paleolithic cave art of western Europe is by no means astonishing, but the symbols that one finds here—birds, and bird perched on top of a staff—are, astonishingly, the same symbols that one finds in both Chinese and Mayan art more than 10,000 years later. Unquestionably, the Maya-China shamanistic continuum, or its ancestral form, can be traced back into the Upper Paleolithic of the Old World, and its geographic expanse enveloped the western as well as the eastern portion of Eurasia.

It is, nevertheless, in eastern Eurasia, specifically in Northeast Asia, that hard evidence of early shamanism must be found; such evidence is needed to substantiate this Maya-China *substratum* at a time level early enough to serve as common ancestor of both Mayan and Chinese shamanism. Such evidence is indeed available at the Mal'ta site near Irkutsk, with an estimated date "on the order of 15,000-18,000 years" (Chard 1974:20-27). More than 600 m² of the site have been excavated, revealing numerous dwellings. Most dwellings were constructed on semisubterranean floors, and used large animal bones to support a roof which incorporated a layer of interlaced reindeer antlers (Chard 1974:20; Gerasimov 1964). Of the greatest interest for us are the art objects and animal burials discovered at Mal'ta:

> Here were unearthed no less than twenty female statuettes of mammoth ivory, from 1.25 to 5.25 inches tall, one represented as though clothed in a cave lion's skin, the others nude. Some fourteen animal burials were also found: six of the arctic fox, six of deer, in each case with the antlers or the hindquarters missing (suggesting that the animals were flayed before burial, possibly to furnish shamanistic attire)...Six flying birds and one swimming, of mammoth ivory—all representing either geese or ducks—were found, along with an ivory fish with a spiral labyrinth stippled upon its side; an ivory baton, suggesting a shaman's staff, and finally, and most remarkably, the skeleton of a rickety four-year-old child with a copious accompaniment of mammoth-ivory ornamentation.... [There in the grave were found] two decorated medallions.... One...seems to have served as a buckle; the other, somewhat larger, showed on one side, scratched or engraved, three cobra-like wavy serpents, and on the other, a stippled design showing a spiral of seven burns with S-forms enclosing it. (Campbell 1983:72-73)

The birds, the serpents, and the wand all suggest to Joseph Campbell shamanistic symbols at Mal'ta. The location of such symbols at such an early age is important; this is the heart of Siberia, the area of the classic shamanism known to modern ethnography, and the region from which the earliest Americans must have departed on their long journey.

These early archaeological finds tie the shamanisms of East Asia and the New World together, and lead us to the even greater question of what happened later in both areas. Namely, in terms of the theories of cultural and social evolution, and regarding the third point mentioned just above, what do the Chinese and Maya cases reveal about the patterns of cultural development out of this substratum into the subsequent civilizations? Do other cases we have not dealt with here conform to the Chinese and Maya patterns? We focus in the following on China.

The cosmological details of the Paleolithic substratum within China itself are unknown, but the history of cultural development from the Paleolithic to the emergence of the farmers, and finally to the rise of the civilization, is well documented (Chang 1987). Apparently the shamanistic views of the world were consistently maintained throughout Chinese prehistory, which is characterized by continuities in many areas of culture. The cultural sequence is not yet documented in enough detail for us to generalize, but we are quite certain that during the course of this development, a political realignment as a result of the competition for scarce resources contributed to social change (namely ranking and stratification). Undoubtedly, the competition occurred within a stable and more or less ecologically defined interaction sphere over a long period of time. In China, this political realignment took place within the same social and shamanistic framework, which accounts for the coexistence of both qualitative transformation and traditional continuity (Chang 1989).

A presentation of the archaeological details of Chinese prehistory from ca. 15,000 to 3,500 years ago is not practical here, but we can give a brief outline (Chang 1987). Sites and lithic assemblages of Paleolithic hunters and fishers are found throughout China, and there were at least two centers of agricultural origins. One center is in the Yellow River valley, featuring millet-farming and the raising of pig and dog by 7,000 B.C., and the other is in the hills and coastal terraces of South China, with such possible cultigens as rice, roots, and tubers. By 5,000 B.C. no fewer than six farming cultures were established, three in North China and three in South China. The three northern cultures—the Hsin-lo culture of the Liao River valley of eastern Inner Mongolia, the Yang-shao culture of the middle Yellow River valley, and the Ta-wen-k'ou culture of Shantung—all have distinctive features, but also share important elements of ceramic form and decoration. The same is true of the three cultures in the south—Ma-chia-pang in southern Kiangsu and northern Chekiang, Ho-mu-tu in northern Chekiang, and Ta-p'en-k'eng in the southeastern coastal area.

These independent and mutually distinctive cultures, by expanding their areas of distribution, came into increasing contact and interaction with one another. By 4,000 B.C., a common interaction sphere was attested to in the archaeological record, a sphere that encompassed, from the north to the south, the Liao River valley, the middle and lower Yellow River valley, the middle and lower Yangtze River valley, and the southeastern coastal areas—in other words, most of so-called China proper. It is within each of the regional components of this interaction sphere that we see the development from the early farming villages to the city states of the initial historical period, the Three Dynasties.

The process of such developments is apparently characterized by sustained regional interaction, the continual formation of regional settlement hierarchies, incessant competition of neighboring polities for land, labor, and scarce resources, and gradual stratification within each polity. In other words, it is a state-formation process that characteristically takes place among competing regional polities within a single strong and coherent interaction sphere. This political process is clearly seen in the written records of the Shang and Chou dynasties:

> The formation of the states cannot be insular, and it must be a process of parallel developments. . . . the states of Hsia, Shang, and Chou occupied different niches in North China, with different resources under their control. The economic interlinkage of three or more states at comparable levels of development brought forth further circulation of natural resources and products North Chinese in scope, creating conditions favorable for the concentration of wealth and the production of surplus within each state. In addition, to strengthen internal cohesion in the name of external threat is a common technique of governance. . . . The interrelationship of competition among Hsia, Shang, Chou, and other states and the formation of national consciousness within each state during a long course of time are also necessary conditions for internal political stability of each of the states. (Chang 1983b:55-56)

The political realignments brought about by such systems of fierce competition resulted in the reshuffling of wealth and its concentration in the hands of the ruling class. The rest of culture and society, in this sense, were redirected to reinforce the new alignment: the segmentary lineages were attached to increased hierarchical powers, and the traditional shamanistic ability to communicate with the worlds beyond came to be monopolized as a political instrument. Thus we see a society vastly transformed, but with civilizational symbols that, even though new, express an essential continuity with prehistoric cultural and social characteristics.

Interestingly, this Chinese pattern of social transformations within a sphere of polities interacting over time is also seen in the formation of New World civilizations. As long as forty years ago, Wendell C. Bennett formulated the concept of the "area co-tradition" for the Andean civilizations: "An area co-tradition is the overall unit of cultural history of an area within which the component cultures have been interrelated over a period of time" (Bennett 1948). Barbara Price has applied a similar concept to Mesoamerica to explain its state formations:

> Within the cluster [in a cluster-interaction model], similar processes of cause and effect are operating to produce similar, parallel or convergent effects in each member; there is thus a basic similarity in adaptive process. This similarity is enhanced by the fact that cluster components are in regular, at least sporadic, interaction with each other. Such interaction takes two principal forms—exchange and competition/warfare—which disseminate innovations and accelerate the overall processes of cultural evolution. (Price 1977:210)

Again, the process of state formation here followed a similar path in both China and the Andes. Even though these are only three case studies, a general observation is definitely permissible: From the base of the China-Maya continuum (or Peter Furst's Asian-American shamanistic substratum) a number of state-formative developments took place along essentially identical paths. These paths are all characterized by common patterns of cluster interaction and political competition, integrated and expressed in terms of a shamanistic ideological tradition carried down from a common source in late Paleolithic times.

Note

1. Adapted from Chapter 4 of the draft of a forthcoming work, *Continuity and Rupture: Ancient China and the Rise of Civilizations.*

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